DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 290 065 CG 020 428

AUTHOR Atkinson, Leslie; And Others
TITLE Subclassification of School Phobic Disturbances.
PUB DATE Aug 87
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (95th, New York, NY, August 28-September 1, 1987).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classification; Clinical Diagnosis; Depression (Psychology); Elementary Secondary Education; Fear; Foreign Countries; *Mothers; *Parent Child Relationship; *Personality Traits; *Psychological Patterns; *School Phobia; *Separation Anxiety; Students
IDENTIFIERS Canada

ABSTRACT

The confusion surrounding all aspects of school refusal may rest partly on the misguided assumption that the disturbance represents a single syndrome. Five consistently emerging variables which may help distinguish among school phobic types were abstracted from the literature: extensiveness of disturbance, mode of onset, age, fear source, and gender. This study was conducted to determine empirically if and how these dimensions relate to one another and to examine the issue of school refusal representing one syndrome. Data from clinical records of 100 school refusers were subjected to a variety of analyses, culminating in cluster analysis. Three school phobic subtypes emerged, reliably grouping 72 of the subjects. Cluster (C) 1 consisted of 15 children who feared separation from dependent, overprotective mothers. C2 consisted of 28 children who were perfectionistic and depressed. They dominated their mothers who had been deprived in childhood. C3 consisted of 29 extensively disturbed children from multiproblem families, who had suffered early separation or loss, and who were fearful and depressed. These findings have direct ramifications for treatment. (Author/NB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED290065

Subclassification of School Phobic Disturbances

Leslie Atkinson
Surrey Place Centre
2 Surrey Place
Toronto, Ontario
M5S 2C2

Bruce Quarrington
York University
Toronto, Ontario

James J. Cyr
Whitby Psychiatric Hospital
Whitby, Ontario

Frederick V. Atkinson
University of Toronto
Toronto, Ontario

Presented at 95th. Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association at New York City, September, 1987.

CG 020428

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

L. Atkinson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ABSTRACT

This study demonstrates that the confusion surrounding all aspects of school refusal rests partly on the misguided assumption that the disturbance represents a single syndrome. Data on 100 refusers were subjected to a variety of analyses, culminating in cluster analysis. Cluster (C) 1 consisted of children who feared separation from dependent, overprotective mothers. C2 youngsters were perfectionistic and depressed. They dominated mothers who had been deprived in childhood. C3 consisted of extensively disturbed children from multiproblem families, who had suffered early separation or loss, and who were fearful and depressed. These clusters are discussed in terms of etiological theories and differential treatment.

"Since it was first noted in the literature, there has been controversey about all aspects of school refusal, including lack of agreement as to the fundamental nature of the disorder, the dynamic formulations applied and suggested therapies, and even the usefulness of the term itself" (Atkinson, Quarrington, & Cyr, 1985, p.83). Atkinson et al have attributed this confusion to an insufficiently specific and discriminating nomenclature. They argued, "It is uncertain whether the disorder is a single syndrome that presents with a variety of symptoms, or a variety of syndromes with a common presenting symptom. In either case, explicit elucidation of the differentiating dimensions and dynamics may constitute an initial step in comprehending the disturbance(s)" (ibid.).

To this end, Atkinson et al (1985) abstracted from the literature five consistently emerging variables which may help distinguish among school phobic types: extensiveness of disturbance, mode of onset, age, fear source, and gender. The presence or absence of depression as a potential discriminator has also been suggested (Atkinson, 1986; Kolvin, Berney, & Bhate, 1985; Weinberg, Emslie, & Wilkes, 1986). Furthermore, Atkinson et al (1985) argued that these subclassificatory variables may be interrelated (i.e., extensiveness and age; extensiveness and onset mode; extensiveness and fear source; fear source and gender; depression and fear source).

The aims of the present investigation were twofold: (a) An attempt was made to determine empirically if and how these dimensions relate to one another, and thereby integrate the literature on concept heterogeneity.

(b) We explored the adequacy of conclusions drawn under the premise that school refusal represents a single syndrome. By showing that particular characteristics are descriptive of one school refusal type, but not others, numerous contradictions in the literature can be resolved.

Method

Data

Data were abstracted from the clinical records of 100 school refusers. Variables included the aforementioned discriminators as well as numerous commonly accepted beliefs derived from the literature.

Analysis

Those variables for which inter-judge reliability was .80 or greater (Scott's (1955) coefficient) were entered into a Pearson correlation matrix. The psychometrically most adequate literature review items were then entered into a second, 20 item correlation matrix with the discriminators. The overall matrix and the component items were tested for degree of interrelatedness (Kaiser, 1970) and the 17 items which met psychometric standards were entered into a final matrix.

This matrix was then factor analyzed. Two extraction and rotation techniques (principal components, varimax; unweighted least squares, quartimax) were used to ensure robustness of solution.

Subjects' factor scores from the four most robust factors were then subjected to cluster analysis. Again, two cluster procedures (Ward's, squared Euclidean distances; cosine of vectors, average linkage) were used to ensure robustness of solution.

Results and Discussion

Three school phobic subtypes emerged, reliably grouping 72 of the children. Cluster (C) 1 consisted of 15 children who feared leaving an overprotective and dependent mother. They had slept longer than is usual with their parents. Clearly, this cluster represents the mutual separation anxiety described by psychoanalytic theorizers (e.g., Broadwin, 1932; Coolidge, Hahn and Peck, 1957). The cluster solution also gave reason to believe that this may contrast with a non-reciprocated separation anxiety, experienced by the child, but not the parents (see Bowlby, 1973).

The 28 children of C2 feared failure and were perfectionistic and depressed. They tended to dominate their parents, and their mothers had often been deprived in childhood. This cluster characterizes well the child described by psychodynamic theorists. Leventhal and Sills (1964) and Radin (1967), for example, maintained that the mother of the school refusing child has low self-esteem and, consequently, needs to believe in the superiority of her youngster. The child, in turn, comes to dominate the parents, and develops an inflated self-concept. When this is threatened by possible failure at school, the child, depressed, retreats homeward.

C3 consisted of 29 extensively disturbed children. These were older youngsters who came from multi-problem homes. Often they had experienced at least one prolonged separation, or a loss. They suffered depression and a pervasive fear of the outside world. Often they have experienced school failure. Their mothers were depressed also, and doubted their own maternal competence. Clearly, C3 comprises characterological or

Type 2 school phobia, as described by Coolidge et al (1957), Waldfogel, Coolidge, and Hahn (1957), and Kennedy (1965).

These findings have direct ramifications for treatment. Most controversey concerns when the child should be returned to school, and who should be treated (Berecz, 1969). Most authors recommend immediate return to school (Berecz, 1969; Johnson, 1979; Trueman, 1984), before the dread of attendance increases, the child gains secondary benefits, and the refusal crystallizes. Such advice seems most applicable to C1 (separation anxiety) and C2 (perfectionistic) refusers, who stand to gain the reinforcement of dependent or subservient parents should they remain home.

A minority of clinicians have argued the need to delay school return, for fear of dangerously exacerbating anxiety (Jarvis, 1964), or precipitating psychosis (Radin, 1967). Such caution seems appropriate for C4 (extensively disturbed) refusers, whose coping mechanisms are already strained. In any case, many of these children are not accruing secondary benefits by remaining in the multi-problem home and their refusal is already well established. Thus, there is no preventative urgency attached to early school return.

Most experts also agree that the child and at least part of the family should be involved in treatment (Berecz, 1969). Again, this appears necessary for C1 and C2 refusers, whose parents are likely sufficiently concerned and well adjusted to participate. However, this may not hold for the extensively disturbed C4 refuser whose parents are more difficult to work with, either because of the scope of their own difficulties, or

because they are not sufficiently concerned with their child's problems. Here, a better strategy might be to work with the child individually, to provide an alternative structured relationship from which the child might move toward autonomy.

References

Atkinson, L. (1986). Depression in school phobia. British Journal of Psychiatry, 148, 335-336.

Atkinson, L., Quarrington, B. & Cyr, J.J. (1985). School refusal: The heterogeneity of a concept. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 55, 83-101.

Berecz, J. (1969). Phobias of childhood: Etiology and treatment. In S, Chess & A. Thomas (Eds.) Annual progress in child psychiatry and child development. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

Bowlby, J. (1973). Attachment and loss. Vol. II. Separation: Anxiety and anger. Harmondworth: Penguin.

Broadwin, I. (1932). A contribution to the study of truancy. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 2, 253-259.

Coolidge, J., Hahn, P., & Peck, A. (1957). School phobia: Neurotic crisis or way of life. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 27, 296-306.

Jarvis, V. (1964). Countertransference in the management of school phobia. Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 33, 411-419.

Johnson, S. (1979). Children's fears in the classroom setting. School Psychology Review, 8, 382-396.

Kaiser, H. (1970). A second generation little jiffy. Psychometrika, 35, 401-416.

Kennedy, W. (1965). School phobia: Rapid treatment of fifty cases. Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 70, 285-289.

Kolvin, I., Berney, T., & Bhate, S. (1984). Classification and diagnosis of depression in school phobia. British Journal of Psychiatry, 145, 347-357.

Leventhal, T. & Sills, M. (1964). Self-image in school phobia. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 34, 685-695.

Radin, S. (1967). Psychodynamic aspects of school phobia. Comprehensive Psychiatry, 8, 119-128

Scott, W.A. (1955). Reliability of content analysis: The case of nominal coding. Public Opinion Quarterly, 19, 321-325.

Trueman, D. (1984). What are the characteristics of school phobic children? Psychological Reports, 54, 191-202.

Waldfogel, S., Coolidge, J., & Hahn, P. (1957). The development, meaning, and management of school phobia. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 27, 754-776.

Weinberg, W., Emslie, G., & Wilkes, C. (1986). Depression in school phobia. British Journal of Psychiatry, 148, 335.